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GENDER AND SMUGGLING

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The dominant approach to gender and smuggling in criminological debates has been premised on the notion of women's progressive "emancipation" from restrictive and patriarchal gender roles (Selmini, 2020; Siegel, 2014: 56). It was understood that feminist political struggles the world over would shatter glass ceilings and lead to gender parity, including parity in the illicit labour of smuggling and organised crime. Summarising this thinking, Siegel (2014: 56) writes that, according to this approach, the role of women in criminal families was previously limited to being a passive, obedient and silent wife, mother and sister whose task was to take care of the household, raise the children, participate in funerals and weddings and promote the image of the male family member as 'men of honour.'

These social restrictions were expected to be erased by changing gender norms and women's liberation. Early – and controversial – feminist theories (e.g., Adler, 1975; Simon, 1975) emerged from the Second Wave of Feminism in the 1970s and posited that patterns revealing women's comparative absence from criminal activity would evolve once women were included as active and independent participants in the labour market and public sphere (Selmini, 2020: 347).

In the decades after feminist debates focused attention on women's liberation – including gender parity when it came to criminal profits – the 'emancipation' hypothesis has been critically re-evaluated along two axes. First, feminist theory has taken a much more nuanced approach to gender justice, particularly through wider explorations of subjectivity (Bourgois, 1996; Hautzinger, 2007), gender relations (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), and multiple intersecting forms of inequality (Thomas and Galembo, 2013). Second, the emancipation hypothesis was revealed to be a fallacy based on "a lack of in-depth historical research [that] has resulted in the misleading observation that in the past only very few women occupied top positions in organized crime" (Siegel, 2014: 63). The rejection of progressive narratives of women's empowerment was paired with a burgeoning research agenda tracking the global flows of information, economic opportunity, media representations, and communication channels that position women in complex ways vis-à-vis illegal markets (Kleemans et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2007).

Despite feminist scholarship challenging the traditional view and documenting women's multifaceted role in illicit economies, both popular and scholarly accounts reproduce and

reinforce commonly held perceptions about crime generally: men are highly over-represented. As scholarship on masculinity and the drug trade attests, this perception is often held by people within illicit economies themselves: “these male representations reinforce, reproduce, and re-construct masculinity. Like most masculinities, men are defined as powerful and competent, violent and bold; women as weak and inept,” even whilst male drug robbers rely on highly proficient female accomplices to shake down drug dealers (Contreras, 2009: 482). Two issues are at stake. First, there is an empirical question about whether women have been active participants all along, even while their work has been minimised or ignored. Second, there is a normative question about equality, and whether this could be achieved by empowering women to rise through the ranks of smuggling organisations. The focus of this chapter will be on the first question, while addressing the normative implications in the conclusion.

This chapter unpacks gendered tropes that have shaped both popular and scholarly approaches to illicit economies, and their cultural associations with masculine bravado. Using an in-depth ethnographic analysis of the role of smuggling in everyday life, particularly in household provisioning and the sexual division of labour within domestic settings, the chapter develops a broader feminist analysis of the household as a key nexus in contraband economies, and not simply a site of women’s oppression. Understanding that nexus offers a better understanding of contraband as it is experienced in everyday life, as well as novel understandings of the fundamental ways gender relations constitute smuggling economies. Focusing on gender in this chapter does not amount to denying that illicit markets are still largely controlled by and benefit men. However, this approach challenges us to rethink the pervasive stereotypes about gendered roles and economic practices by highlighting women’s complex positions in the smuggling trade.

Unmarked categories of smuggling

The scant literature on women and girls in smuggling economies is itself telling. As sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh noted in his classic essay on “Gender and Outlaw Capitalism,” the moniker *girl gangs* exposes the longstanding subordination of women’s experience in street gangs to that of men, such that “male deviant collectives have (unsurprisingly) been given the unmarked category ‘gang’” (Venkatesh, 1998: 683). There is a deeply held assumption that men are the agents of gangs, and that women are either epiphenomenal to the social structure of criminal groups, or their passive victims (cf Anderson, 2005 for a critique).¹ This observation – that men occupy the unmarked category of smuggler, narco, gang, mafioso, and so on, while women’s participation must always be marked and qualified – applies for illicit economies more generally.

An attempt to document women’s participation in smuggling economies also calls for a re-think of how we track illicit economies over the twentieth century. Scholars of globalization have noted a major shift since the 1980s, such that the retreat of the welfare state and deregulation of many industries has put an emphasis on flexible, entrepreneurial, and informal labour. Illicit economies have concomitantly boomed. Women have been considered relatively insulated from the effects of neoliberal restructuring and global shift towards economic precarity that has been associated with the rise of informal and illicit economies in the Global South (Sassen, 2007; Young, 2007). This is

based on the common assumption that female identity is *generally* not as contested as male identity ... [and] the notion that female identity is rooted almost entirely in the family and the family is somehow less volatile than economic institutions

(Moore, 2007: 190)

These assumptions about female identity led to an overemphasis on women's participation in informal but *licit* economies. The feminized attributes of flexibility and care towards the family have been the primary justification for the boom in both not-for-profit and commercial microfinance lending, which sought to harness these apparently "natural" traits and put them in service of micro-enterprises (Kar and Schuster, 2016; Schuster, 2014, 2015). Being able to absorb economic shocks and provide the intimate care work to protect the family from the retreat of welfare states and harsh reality of privatisation has been seen as a testament to women's supposedly inherent 'resilience' (Fraser, 2009). While the effects of microfinance are subject to considerable debate, the findings of both advocates as well as critics cast doubt on the presumption that women are "naturally" bound to the home, and that their economic practices are relatively protected from global economic transformations.

While women's uptake in participation in informal economies has been well documented, evidence points to profound social dislocations for women as well as for men brought on by global political and economic shifts in the twentieth century. Feminist criminologists suggest that the less-well-studied phenomenon of women's participation in illicit economies further challenges us to rethink women's rootedness in the domestic sphere. Joan W. Moore's research on female gangs suggests that migration further dislocates young women from intergenerational socialisation, such that each adolescent group "sets its own norms for sexuality, aggressiveness, and self-control vis-à-vis drug and alcohol use" (Moore, 2007: 192). There is a disconnect, then, between stereotyped portrayals of women as "victims of organized crime or as 'mean girls,' girlfriends, wives, lovers or brides of notorious gangsters and mobsters" (Hübschle, 2014: 31), and the wider (though too often invisible and ignored) reality of women's participation in illicit markets.

This disconnect can be attributed to some widely held beliefs – both among the wider public as well as gang members themselves – about the figures that populate the smuggling trade, whether contraband, organised crime, money laundering, the drug trade, and so on. As criminologist Annette Hübschle has noted in her review of women in organised crime in Southern Africa, women are often ignored because of broader assumptions about a clandestine criminal underworld. This association with violent crime erases the fact that "politicians, law enforcement agents, government officials and businesspersons facilitate illegal market exchanges and collaborate with organized crime networks" (Hübschle, 2014: 33). The reality of everyday economic practices suggests that, while stereotyped representations of violent and powerful men prevail in the media and in criminology treatments of illegal markets, qualitative research indicates a complex interpenetration of licit and illicit economies (Chalfin, 2008; Roitman, 2005), sustained by a diversity of economic projects and livelihood aspirations. This work on the wider social landscapes of contraband challenges the presumption of professional hyper-macho underground gangsters preying on a passive feminized upper world (Hübschle, 2014: 33).

One way to address these limitations is to rethink the familiar dichotomies that separate men's roles from women's roles. Feminist scholars denominate this a "relational approach" to gendered economic life that addresses the connections among social categories rather than focusing on each pole of the binary in isolation. For example, this has led some feminist scholars to suggest women have an important supporting role in apparently masculine illicit economies (Anderson, 2005). Cases such as ethnic Albanian women supporting their husbands while not acting as 'independent bosses' themselves (Arsovska and Begum, 2014), or the elevated position of women in the Italian mafia as groups become more professional and less homicidal (Selmini, 2020), suggest that these supporting roles carry pervasive gendered expectations about care, kinship, and appropriate femininity, and that these are constituted within wider systems of gender and sexuality. I turn now to the gendered roles that shape both smuggling and domestic life at their intersection.

Smuggling and domestic provisioning

What would a relational approach to gendered economic life look like if it were applied to households involved in the smuggling trade? While the market has usually been understood as public, and opposed to domestic family life, a closer inspection of gender relations requires a more nuanced methodology. These interconnections between market and home were the focus of my ethnographic research (2006–2017) on debt and development in Ciudad del Este, the prosperous ‘special customs zone’ and notorious contraband hub on the Paraguayan side of the Tri-Border Area (TBA) with Argentina and Brazil (Schuster, 2015). Famous in the region as a re-export bottleneck for both licit and illicit commodities, the city is widely stereotyped as the unplanned and chaotic apogee of freewheeling frontier capitalism, driven by the needs of commerce and speculation. Even illicit commodities are re-exported. This is not driven by the quest for lower tariffs, but rather to harness the logistics, transportation, and financing networks that animate *all* trade in the region. Tellingly, “local state actors actively foster spatial disorder and legal uncertainty as part of planning practice” (Tucker, 2017: 74) especially to encourage speculative deals that benefit elites. The initial planning for the city in the late 1950s proceeded along just such lines. Urban development was immediately outsourced to a private conglomerate led by a close associate and sometimes-business-partner of Paraguay’s longtime authoritarian regime of President Alfredo Stroessner (1954–1989). For a city designed and developed to channel flows of dark finance, citizens’ prosperity and well-being was inextricably linked to the fortunes of commerce, and often bundled up in the smuggling trade.

Since private commercial profits were the only robust social safety net in Ciudad del Este, my research with women who took on small-scale microcredit loans focused attention on their many complex investments. More often than not, seeking out credit from a variety of finance companies, including anti-poverty microcredit loans, was part of an ongoing effort to invest in deals that would buoy them along with the rising tide of commercial fortunes in the city. For poor women making do in the margins of Ciudad del Este’s commercial boom, their investments – and the social security they were hoped to engender – were most often fuelled by mounting debts (see Han, 2011, 2012). By the early 2000s, the economy sagged under pressure from Brazilian customs enforcement and the slow-moving effects of regularizing regional customs laws through the Mercosur Southern Common Market (Dent, 2017; Rabossi, 2012; Schuster, 2019a). Seeking social security through commercial windfalls was ever more untenable for low-income families (Schuster, 2019b). The net effect was ever-more desperate investments linked to ever-more desperate loan payments.

One of the most striking encounters with smuggling during my ethnographic fieldwork in Ciudad del Este occurred in a family home surrounded by chickens and pigs, not the glitzy shopping malls and hectic traffic that have made the Paraguayan city a famous contraband hub. We were in the poor peri-urban outskirts of the city, in a settlement at the end of a winding dirt road, sitting around a plastic card table on the front patio in front of a small weatherboard home painted a cheerful salmon pink. I had arrived with the financing team from Fundación Paraguaya, a non-profit microcredit organisation that offered small loans to unlock women’s “entrepreneurial potential.” We were at this particular house to negotiate the terms of a new line of credit. The three generations of women sitting at the negotiating table – grandmother, mother and daughter – were smugglers. Tellingly, nobody at the gathering was willing to disclose the goods involved.

The disagreement with Josefina, the loan officer in charge of managing the family’s line of credit, had nothing to do with moral or legal qualms with the women’s dubious line of work. Rather, she was concerned about the paperwork. For the loan to be approved by her own

managers in the organisation's head office, Josefina was required to provide some proof of income to guarantee the viability of the business venture, such as purchase orders, sales receipts, and so on. The office was under intense scrutiny due to the wider macrostructural issues: the year was 2009 and we were in the middle of the global financial crisis, and the crash of credit markets around the world. At the microsocial level this left Josefina with a problem. Her folio of documents only contained a contract with the exporter. The hastily prepared agreement contained scant information: the equivalent of a handshake agreement, which would not stand up to scrutiny at the head office. The women insisted that they were planning on traveling across the border between Paraguay and Argentina via Brazil to "do the deal" (*hacer negocio*), but that it simply was not possible to get a formal receipt. They added that their aunt did the same thing and had even introduced them to the smuggling network. Trying to sway Josefina, they argued that their aunt was even a client of Fundación Paraguaya. By their telling, their kinswoman had presented exactly the same information to secure her own approval for a line of credit. However, the whole family business was emphatically off the books, as were so many in Ciudad del Este. Despite being fully aware of what that implied, Josefina was adamant. She wanted a receipt, "something to prove what [she] was buying, some way to demonstrate commercial movement (*movimiento comercial*)."

In the end, the grandmother came to the rescue. She sold the smuggled merchandise at an informal shop in the city centre, and also had a side business selling Avon cosmetics through a multi-level marketing arrangement. While the cosmetics business was financed independently from the smuggling, she offered to use the sales receipts and purchase orders to collateralise the loan her daughter was negotiating with Josefina, which in turn would ensure her own sales venture remained viable. All parties to the deal were satisfied: Josefina understood that the loan would be repaid but was circumspect with her questions, the family secured its line of credit and provided some valid documents for the finance company, and the observing ethnographer got a brief glimpse into Ciudad del Este's smuggling economy.

At the time, I found the encounter quite confronting. I was taken aback with the micro-finance organization's cavalier treatment of smuggling. The loan officer appeared to be much more concerned with getting the proper documentation than with what I perceived to be the more obvious scandal whereby development monies were fuelling the contraband trade. As I came to appreciate later, the complex intermingling of domestic economies with smuggling suggested that contraband also sustained what I call an *economy of gender*. That is, the social categories and scripts available to actors working within the smuggling trade were also relations of gender.

A framework based on an economy of gender is not satisfied with comparing men and women. Instead, we must ask deeper questions about what being a woman actually *means* in Paraguay's smuggling economy, and how womanhood is shaped by illicit trade. Women drew on these gender relations resourcefully to make a living in Paraguay's dangerous and lucrative borderland. The microcredit deal was only possible because the family laundered the loan contract through the perfectly acceptable and feminine Avon business, which offered a veneer of respectability to the endeavour. The reason that the whole thing was believable was that it fit neatly with the microcredit narrative of feminine economic behaviour. The deal was endorsed by the NGO because it sustained the image of "women entrepreneurs" – gender expectations that kept Josefina and the NGO in business. While the NGO clung to the pristine image of the independent businesswoman, actual gendered interdependencies such as intergenerational matriarchal kinship obligations were the life blood of Ciudad del Este's smuggling trade, were minimized by the lender. All of these economic behaviours were organised around specific expressions of feminine subjectivity. Crucially, these specific gendered identities (grandmother,

“hard woman” smuggler (Schuster, 2015), efficient financial professional specialising in women’s loans) stuck together in the social network through which Ciudad del Este’s commercial monies flowed. It only ‘worked’ because of the specific gendered performances of its principal actors.

In her research on the spatial logics of “accumulation by transgression” in Paraguay’s Tri-Border Area, urban studies scholar Jennifer Tucker (2020: 1465) suggests that a local term, *blindaje*,² is used to assess the differential visibility of illicit economic practices in Ciudad del Este. Used as vernacular to describe mutually beneficial arrangements between judges and politicians in the merchant bloc, *blindaje* promises impunity in exchange for kickbacks. This contextual invisibility was powerfully at work in the negotiations between Josefina and the intergenerational family of women smugglers. It was what allowed innocuous and feminised Avon sales receipts situationally to conceal the family’s contraband business, and allowed the smugglers to fly under the radar of state surveillance at the border. Tucker suggests that these practices of obfuscation often benefit powerful elites, since investigative journalism and political inquests demand evidence connecting particular individuals to specific criminal acts (Tucker 2020: 1466; see also Schuster 2019a). Notorious contraband kingpins such as former President Horacio Cartes, who sits at the apex of a multi-million-dollar cigarette smuggling empire, rely on this obfuscation. For the ex-President, “raced and gendered performances of (im)plausible deniability also hide accumulation by transgression ... [embodying] the alchemy by which transgression transmutes into legitimised political authority” (Tucker, 2020: 1466).

My ethnographic analysis of the economy of gender in Ciudad del Este’s marginal low-income neighbourhoods suggests that powerful modes of feminine concealment work alongside elite obfuscation through *blindaje*. Women smugglers are relatively disregarded both by scholars assessing smuggling economies as well as by local narratives valorising masculine success and profits in the contraband trade. This worked to their benefit, as they evaded detection and moved freely in spaces where men were subject to higher scrutiny. However, flipping the script and re-reading the encounter detailed above draws out some unexpected convergences between the position of the former President and the family of smugglers. For the women, powerful family ties exceed the domestic context and connect them to valuable networks of accomplices, savvy negotiations make use of local cultural frameworks of visibility and concealment, and the home is reconceptualised as a key site for financial speculation: these are all economic practices that should make us question whether women are really passive subjects of smuggling. However, even while we centre women in Ciudad del Este’s smuggling economy, we must not lose sight of the double disadvantage of gender and poverty. Smuggling offered up a pathway for marginalised women to make ends meet, but not an opportunity for accumulation. Their multiple forms of disadvantage call into question the normative empowerment framework that views women’s greater participation as a good thing.

Gendered labour as opportunity and vulnerability

The women smugglers I encountered in Ciudad del Este participated in a type of trade that is very common in border zones and contraband economies throughout Latin America. Often denominated “ant contraband” (*contrabando de hormigas, comercio hormiga*), borderlanders historically moved small quantities of goods through repetitive small trips across a porous border (Galemba, 2017: 6; Schuster, 2015). In Ciudad del Este, locals smuggle household items like cooking oil, petrol, Tupperware, tomatoes, and frozen chickens in order to provision their domestic economies. Women also work for hire, moving small consumer electronics like cell phones and laptops for Brazilian and Argentinean buyers, often slipping these in between the

folds of blankets and clothing that are seen as more traditionally feminine purchases. *Contrabando de hormigas* works because women do not fit the expected template of a smuggler, and can thus slip past border guards and checkpoints. This is “everyday petty smuggling in which most local residents are implicated” (Ferradás, 2013: 266). As Rebecca Galemba has noted, based on her ethnography of contraband on the Guatemala-Mexico border, “most of these goods were considered illegal only because they used the unmonitored route to enter and exit the country; otherwise they were mundane items such as corn, coffee, and clothing” (Galemba, 2017: 15), belying the historic interconnection of border zones as well as the role of the border as a politico-legal phenomenon that *creates* smuggling (i.e., redefining local exchange networks and provisioning strategies as extra-legal).

Scholars of Latin American border zones have noted that “local residents have long pursued illegal routes to acquire commodities for their households and workplaces” (Jusionyte, 2013: 244, 2015a), and frequently justify their unlawful – but licit and locally sanctioned – exchanges by critiquing unfair trade regimes and laws emanating from a remote political centre, and benefitting elites (ibid; Schuster 2019a). Through an analysis of the economy of gender in the smuggling trade, it is apparent that phenomenon such as ‘ant contraband’ are key modes of smuggling, and deeply bound up with wider political and legal dynamics. I argue that a feminist analysis can recast the domestic and the household as key sites within contraband economies, and not simply a characteristic mode of oppression for women bound (and limited by) their reproductive function (Leacock, 1979; Yanagisako, 2015).

Rethinking the domestic and its relation to smuggling economies opens up two further lines of inquiry. First, the interpenetration of intimate and domestic activities such as self-styling and consumption with the flows of global trade and travel, forces us to rethink the boundaries, composition, and scale of “the household.” This is particularly important as global manufacturing has moved South, and relies heavily on a feminine labour force. Second, the fact that in many settings women continue to be bound to household and family duties means that violence is especially likely to affect them when drugs and money move through domestic spaces.

Carla Freeman’s classic work, “Is Local: Global as Feminine: Masculine? Rethinking the Gender of Globalization” (2001) tracks women who practice “higglering” (market intermediaries) in the Caribbean. Historically, they moved agricultural commodities from the hinterlands, and in turn brought urban commodities back to the countryside. In the context of plantation slavery, “she also came to embody a figure of womanhood in which physical movement, travel, and business acumen were defining characteristics” (ibid: 1019). Today, women travel between Barbados and Miami to make overseas purchases, “reselling these in an active (and illegal) informal market at home” (Freeman, 2001: 1021). Denominated “suitcase traders” due to their iconic travel accoutrements, these women range from airline flight attendants, to middle class women shopping for friends, to specialists who make a business in a particular niche market like baby clothes. Despite the state’s attempts to crack down on the “suitcase trade,” this practice of illegally importing goods remains an important supplement to the income of unemployed and low-wage workers across the region (see also Ulyse, 2007).

The practice of higglering is especially important for the low-income informatics employees who work as data-entry specialists at multinational companies in the free trade zone. These women come to rely on smuggled fashion accessories as both a supplement to their income as well as a crucial class-marker that helps define their upward social mobility. Rather than a vocation, this involvement in the “suitcase trade” is a supplement to the low wages they earn in offshore informatics *and* a consequence of the globalised work they perform in the corporate workplace.³ Their desire for the expensive foreign brand-name fashions that mark their

‘workplace professionalism’ and compliance with the company dress code was reinforced by a system of productivity rewards for high-achieving employees that included travel vouchers on American Airlines, which was owned by the same parent company as the informatics firm. Women went to great lengths to “purchase new clothes and accessories that mark their non-factory [pink collar] status,” (ibid: 2024) working as smugglers in order to be perceived as disciplined and productive in their informatics jobs. Their informatics work in turn provided the resources like travel vouchers and incentives like professional recognition, both of which fueled their suitcase trade. Their personal self-styling and domestic provisioning was part and parcel with their public professional ambitions, and both relied on and enabled illicit commercial importation.

Conversely, scholars studying the narco-economy suggest that the regional and transnational drug trade perforates the boundaries of the household and expose women to heightened vulnerabilities in intimate settings. Shaylih Muehlmann’s poignant and finely detailed study of the drug war on the US-Mexico border focuses on several interrelated feminine identity categories that shape – and, importantly, constrain – women’s options for relating to the narco-economy. Through the figures of “narco-wives, beauty queens, and mother’s bribes,” she underscores the fact that while “media representations of the drug cartels and the war on drugs [focus] almost exclusively on men [and] chronicle the exploits of macho drug capos, hit men, and smugglers” (Muehlmann, 2013: 30), the templates for feminine comportment are configured around women styled as either mothers or the beautiful and sexualised girlfriends of powerful men. Women feel powerfully attracted to the role of “narco-wife,” exemplified by one research participant’s story of love at first sight when she saw a local youth sporting alligator-skin boots (symbolically coded for success in the narco business) (see also Arsovska and Begum, 2014). The feminized role of the narco-wife accrues a certain symbolic status of its own, and is empowering for women who attain wealth and can evoke the power to bring punitive violence to bear against rivals. However, the status of narco-wife is even more vulnerable than their powerful macho husbands. Not only are they targets of violence, torture, and murder as vengeance or retaliation against their spouse, but furthermore, “while narcos are still narcos when imprisoned, the luxurious life of a narco-wife is compromised beyond recognition” (Muehlmann, 2013: 47).

Women find themselves limited by the templates of appropriate femininity available within Mexico’s narco-economy. At the same time, many low-income women are rendered vulnerable by their husband’s or son’s work in narco-trafficking through their presence in the home. Muehlmann observes that,

Because many women in rural Mexico work from home, they tend to be at greater risk of exposure. They are in the places where the police and military are most likely to search first. On the other hand, women’s position in their homes also makes them vulnerable to cartel coercion. It is not uncommon in the rural north to intimidate people into allowing their homes to serve as ‘stash houses’ for drugs between deliveries or sales. In this case, someone knocks on the door and asks the woman at home to take care of something, a package, a vehicle, a box. She knows from their clothes and vehicles they are driving that it would be unwise to refuse. (Muehlmann, 2013: 41)

Thus, women are left with few options, since their implication in the narco-economy is hardly a choice aimed at profiting from the smuggling trade. Instead, it is a feature of the interpenetration of the home and the drug economy, effectively collapsing the distinction between domestic and public spheres (Comaroff, 1987; Helliwell, 2018).

Importantly, women are no less vulnerable when they seek legal and licit work outside of the home. Indeed, as Galemba argues, “The criminalization of contraband moralizes the limited options of the poor by blaming them for their own plight while allowing more powerful entities to claim and protect legitimate profits and determine who can sell and have access to goods” (Galemba, 2017: 20, 2012). This is powerfully illustrated by the role of *maquiladora* manufacturing in Mexican “special customs zones,” which demand women’s labour and explicitly are geared towards feminized workers who are stereotyped as having “nimble” hands and “docile” attitudes (Salzinger, 2004). Again, there is not a sharp divide between the legal domain of factory work and the illegal world of the drug trade. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which establishes the legal and economic basis for *maquila* manufacturing, is also implicated in the transnational financing flows whereby profits from the drug trade are absorbed by hedge funds in the United States: a process of “moving the money when the bank accounts get full” (Muehlmann, 2013: 134–151).

So why wouldn’t women choose the licit option of working at the manufacturing plants rather than remaining at home, exposed to the vulnerabilities of the narco-economy? The short answer is that these are hardly safe themselves.

The maquiladoras have been associated with another terrifying surge of violence that has specifically targeted women in the region. The femicide that since 2000 has claimed the lives of more than 3,800 women and girls particularly in and around Ciudad Juárez (with another 3,000 still reported missing. (Muehlmann, 2013: 49; Wright, 2001, 2011, 2013)

Tellingly, investigation of the murders – or making any effort at all, for that matter, to find the perpetrators and establish their motives – was never pursued by police. The governor went so far as to declare that the murdering and dumping of dozens of young women was “normal” for a rapidly expanding and impoverished border city such as Ciudad Juárez, and assured Mexican families that “there was nothing to fear as long as they knew where their female family members were” (Wright, 2011: 713). Thus, rather than policing their violent attackers, the authorities preferred to police women’s behaviour, using patriarchal norms to suggest “private women safely at home had nothing to worry about” (ibid), and further insinuating that women and girls who had gone missing might have lived “double lives” a sex workers. The effort on the part of public officials to weaken public sympathy for victims led to a culture of impunity, such that victims were blamed for ‘transgressing’ norms of appropriate femininity. Despite growing activism from feminist organisations, femicide was rarely investigated. Thus, while women’s vulnerability to the narco-economy came about indirectly because of their work within the home, women were specifically targeted with violence for working within outside of the home in the *maquila* factories. The targeting of factory workers challenges the moral distinction between legal and illegal, and upends pervasive assumptions about the relatively safety or danger of legal “free trade” versus illegal work in the narco-economy.

Conclusion

Studies thematizing gender in illicit economies and criminal networks have commented pointedly on the “paucity in literature [and] limited number of cases available” (Anderson, 2005: 92; see also Moore, 2007). This is due in part to challenges of taking quantitative approaches to studying smuggling, which provide only a very superficial view of secretive and clandestine practices. Stereotyped assumptions about masculinity, criminality, and violence

further contribute to the limited field of research. Women's smuggling is doubly concealed, as it is invisible to our social science data and also relatively devalued compared to men's work.

A new research agenda focused on the "economy of gender" in smuggling has a number of advantages. Foremost is the empirical benefit of documenting a hitherto invisible and misunderstood area of social life and economic practice. The ethnographic studies surveyed here are beginning to open a window into the dynamics of illicit economies as they are experienced in the everyday. However, localizing analyses of smuggling and providing a detailed account of women's economic practices helps answer one set of problems while leaving another intact. That is, dominant theories of illicit economies as a transnational and macrosocial phenomenon still refer to unmarked categories to produce the guiding concepts and debates that drive scholarship on smuggling. As Carla Freeman warned us in her critique of globalization theory, this is a wider problem for feminist theories of capitalism: "the turn to gender on local terrain has inadvertently been the slippery slope on which the equation between local and feminine gets reinscribed" (Freeman, 2001: 1012). This equation has the consequence of eclipsing women/gender from macro-structural models of political economy. Not only does this limit our theory-building around smuggling, it has real effects on the professional advancement and scholarly accolades of researchers focused on economies of gender, as they find themselves shut out of making high-impact contributions to social theory (Driscoll and Schuster, 2018). Perversely, detailed and novel research on gender and smuggling can open significant new lines of research while also torpedoing a research career.

Alternative avenues are available. In this chapter I advocate for a feminist re-conceptualization of smuggling that repositions gendered practices not merely as local or particular effects but also as a constitutive element in these economic systems. We can begin to see how this might take shape in feminist retheorisation of the household as a complex, multi-scalar and thoroughly financialised cultural logic, rather than an innate or sub-social unit to which women are bound by their reproductive function (see e.g., MacCormack and Strathern, 1980). Feminist social science across a number of disciplines has a vital role to play by bringing together new theoretical approaches to smuggling with granular empirical study of specific contraband economies.

Notes

- 1 The considerable literature on human trafficking and modern slavery paints a different picture, suggesting that in 30% of the countries that provided data to the United Nations global report on trafficking in persons, women make up the largest proportion of traffickers. The report adds that "in some parts of the world, women trafficking women is the norm" (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNDOC), 2009). My review of smuggling focuses on the production and circulation of illicit commodities rather than enslavement. For a feminist approach to human trafficking, see (Ticktin, 2011; Tripp et al., 2013).
- 2 The term has a double meaning deriving from its military usage to denote a protective screen. See also Jusionyte's discussion of *convivencia* (co-existence and collaboration) as a local idiom on the Argentinean side of the border (Jusionyte, 2015b: 129).
- 3 In Barbados, this was highly feminized work, where women between the ages of 18–35 entered electronic data from airlines, insurance claims, legal briefs, and so on. Freeman suggests that informatics employers directly encourage the smuggling trips through a matrix of strict dress codes, free airline tickets as a reward for productivity, and women's own desire for fashions that support their self-image of professionalism (Freeman, 2001: 1023–1024).

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